

AIRGRAM

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FROM : USINT BAGHDAD

DATE: December 1, 1972

SUBJECT : Political Assessment of Iraq - December 1, 1972

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Introduction: This is a very tentative assessment of the Iraqi regime based on only two-and-a-half months in the country and a total reliance on secondary sources and the public media. It is long only because it is the first such assessment from Baghdad in over five years. Comments from end-users, who on some subjects may have better information than available to USINT, are not just encouraged, but solicited.

I. THE INTERNAL SCENE

The Baath regime, in power since July 1968, has achieved a semblance of stability. The only organized opposition appears to be the Kurds who are in physical control of a sizeable portion of territory along the Iranian border. Public order is maintained elsewhere with apparent ease. Until the June 1 nationalization, the economic growth rate was substantial (GNP in real terms rose at an annual rate of 5.4% from 1966 to 1970 and much more rapidly in 1971). Although no recent figures are available, the rigorous austerity measures do not seem to have hurt the vast majority of Iraqis. This year's crops were very good and some grain is being exported. Travel restrictions have just been lifted for the Haj and for the favored few, there are new Mercedes (although officially banned) and something of a construction boom in luxury residential housing.

The Iraqi people have, however, paid a price for the new stability. It has been achieved through the application of increasingly effective police state methods. Many able Iraqis have gone into exile and those who remain live in a state of uncertainty and sometimes fear. Baghdad is a city of whispered conversations and glances over the shoulder. A recent incident gives an inkling of what it is like for an educated Iraqi; Dr.

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B. THE SOVIET THREAT

Relations with the Soviet Union and other COMECON countries have increased most substantially since nationalization and credits and loans now total \$775 million. The Iraqi request for observer status with COMECON is seen here as both a bargaining gambit with the West and an indication that Iraq does not again intend to become so dependent on the West. Relations with the Soviet Union, however, go well beyond economics as demonstrated by the very active Soviet role in all three of the major domestic issues facing the regime (see above). While the French Ambassador is most eloquent on the Soviet threat, perhaps to facilitate his mission, the consensus of Western Ambassadors is that Iraq and the Gulf have become major targets for the USSR. The areas of concentration are the oil sector, the military, irrigation, and the development of an Iraqi fishing fleet to ply the Arab Gulf and the Indian Ocean (Baghdad 56). More ominous is the close Communist relationship with the Ministry of Interior and Party security apparatuses. The December 3 formal agreement between the Czech and Iraqi Ministries of Interior is, as the Iraqi Minister said, "only bringing the existing relationship into the open".

We should not be lulled into complacency about the Soviet threat by the fact that Arab states elsewhere have proved relatively impervious to a dominant Russian presence. Iraq may be different. Few Arab countries are as culturally diverse and therefore capable of being controlled by a small, militant minority. For Russia, Iraq is geographically the closest Arab country. Its concrete interests here are substantial (oil, Indian Ocean, border security). The Soviets may not wish to gain direct control over the levers of power, but we should not discount this possibility. One could not help but be struck by the statement in a recent editorial in the official al-Jumhuriya that "Iraq and India form the foundation of the progressive front in Asia".

C. RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

Although relations with the West are somewhat in abeyance pending the outcome of the IPC conflict, Iraq is seeking to expand these ties. France continues to be courted openly, but the French Ambassador maintains that no new commitments are being made, despite the commercial loss entailed, pending a settlement. If negotiations fail, France will be faced with a cruel choice of breaking with its IPC partners or losing its incipient "special position" here.

President al-Bakr received the new Canadian Ambassador on November 28 and insisted that the West had forced Iraq toward the Communist world. The Ambassador was later informed that Iraq had named an Ambassador to Ottawa despite the knowledge that Canada could not reciprocate. Greece and Brazil will establish

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